

This Day in History... March 6, 1906

Happy Birthday Lou Costello

Louis Francis Cristillo (known as Lou Costello) was born on March 6, 1906, in Paterson, New Jersey.

From an early age, Costello was a talented athlete. He was especially good at basketball, and was once reportedly crowned the New Jersey state free throw champion. (He later used his basketball talents in *Here Come the Co-Eds*, when he performed his own hoop shots without special effects.) Costello also had brief success as a boxer under the name "Lou King."

Costello was also a great fan of Charlie Chaplin growing up. And when he was 21, he moved to Hollywood to become famous. Like many, he didn't become a star, but found work as a laborer and extra. His athletic talents earned him occasional work as a stunt man, such as in the 1928 film *The Trail of '98*. He also appeared in *The Fair Co-Ed* and in the Laurel and Hardy film, *The Battle of the Century*.

By 1930, Costello had failed to reach the level of stardom he'd hoped for and decided to hitchhike back home. However, he ran out of money in Saint Joseph, Missouri, and took a job as a comic at a burlesque theater. It was at this time he changed his name to Costello, after actress Helene Costello. Once he had enough money, he traveled to New York and worked in vaudeville and burlesque theaters.

It was around this time that Costello first crossed paths with Bud Abbott. They worked together for the first time in 1935 when Costello's then-partner didn't show up for a performance at the Eltinge Theater. They officially became a comedy team the following year. Soon, they signed with the William Morris talent agency and got national attention on *The Kate Smith Hour* variety show in 1938. That year they debuted their now famous "Who's on First?" skit.

Abbott and Costello's success continued to spread, next to Broadway in *The Streets of Paris*. And in 1940, they signed a movie contract with Universal Pictures. The pair made their film debut in *One Night in the Tropics* in 1940. Though they were only in supporting roles, they proved to be popular with audiences. The following year, they had their breakthrough in *Buck Privates*, and from there quickly became Hollywood's top comedians.

Between 1940 and 1956, Abbott and Costello made 36 films and were among the highest-paid entertainers in the world. In 1942 they started a weekly radio show. Costello lost some of his fun-loving demeanor following the death of his infant son in 1943. Around this same time, his partnership with Abbott grew rocky, though they eventually reconciled.

In 1951 Abbott and Costello became occasional hosts of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*. And the following year they launched their own sit-com, *The Abbott and Costello Show*, which ran for two seasons. By the mid-1950s, Costello's health had forced the pair to quit work on *Fireman Save My Child*.

This, coupled with their drop in popularity, led Universal to drop their contract. Abbott and Costello made their final movie together, the independent film, *Dance With Me, Henry*, in 1956. They amicably ended their partnership the following year. Costello did his own stand up shows and appeared on Steve Allen's *The Tonight Show*. He attempted to embark on a dramatic acting career, appearing on *Wagon Train*. But his final film was a comedy – *The 30 Foot Bride of Candy Rock*.

Costello died just three days before his 53rd birthday, on March 3, 1959. In 1992, his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey installed a statue in his honor in the Lou Costello Memorial Park.



Abbott and Costello were honored in the 1991 Comedians set.



Costello was a state free-throw champion at least once (his daughter said he may have been two or three times).



The "Who's on First" comedic premise descended from early 1900s minstrel shows. Abbott and Costello made the baseball skit famous in 1938. The skit is also memorialized at the Baseball Hall of Fame. While they're not official inductees, they're part of a small number of non-athletes honored at the museum.



During a 35-day national tour in 1942, Abbott & Costello sold \$85 million in war bonds.



In 1947, the pair opened the Lou Costello Jr. Youth Recreation Center.

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